

Ottumwa  
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# <sup>108</sup>Ottumwa stakes 'Great Places' claim

By **MATT MILNER**  
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**OTTUMWA** — State coaches came to Ottumwa Thursday to learn just why the city has made a claim as one of Iowa's great places.

Gov. Tom Vilsack developed the Iowa Great Places initiative as a means of bringing state resources to bear on local areas. Vilsack's goal is to spur local development for business, recreation and residential opportunities by emphasizing what Iowa communities have to offer.

Response to the initiative has been strong, with some 150 locations lining up for a shot at becoming one of three pilot locations. Ottumwa was among the applicants and Thursday's meeting was the second step in the process. Backers of Ottumwa's bid on Thursday got their first look at the state's expectations.

Vilsack deliberately left details of the state's expectations vague; in fact the state has not announced any set of requirements for participation. That doesn't mean no expectations exist. Officials have a definite set of characteristics they are looking for. They want a sense of place and engaging experiences, as well as a place with a "rich social fabric."

Economic factors will play a role. Documents handed out during the meeting included the economy as a key aspect for applicants. "An Iowa Great Place contains a balanced, growing, transformative mix of rewarding jobs and sustaining

capital," one sheet read.

Ottumwa's application focuses on the Des Moines riverbanks. The western edge includes Quincy Place Mall before sweeping around Ottumwa Park. The boundaries follow the park's lagoons back to the river before flowing east along the river to the Highway 34 bridge. The boundaries then take to the north riverbank, encompassing the area south of Cargill Meat Solutions. The area includes the northern part of downtown Ottumwa and proceeds west to include Turkey Island before dropping back down to the mall.

Mayor Dale Uehling addressed the meeting from the audience. He said Ottumwa needs renovation, rather than starting from scratch.

"Ottumwa, like an old house, this is a community that needs to be restored," he said. "We want to be a great place, we are a great place. We just need to get things restored."

Both organizers and the audience sought to bring the coaches up to speed on Ottumwa. They spoke about the events of the past several years, about Bridge View Center and the effort to get a casino. They emphasized that the community is moving forward after years of bitter arguments.

Jerome Thompson, a curator with the state historical society, said the initial efforts to give the coaches the community's background and hopes were precisely what was needed.

"Coaches are, first of all, supposed to listen, to hear what the ideas of the community are and

then try to work with the group to apply what some of the principles are that the citizens' advisory committee will be looking at. If there's an area where we have a special expertise then we'd be able to contribute to that," he said.

Ottumwa seems to be in a good position to start. Thompson said he felt Thursday's meeting went "very well."

"The invitation that was first of all signed, it looks a lot at the focus, and the river is an important part of this particular place, it has been historically," Thompson said. "It's looking at how building upon the past and making it add something to the present is impressive to me."

Ottumwa's application drew interest from across the city. The audience at Thursday's meeting had representatives from both the city and county government, including Uehling and former Mayor Van Gates.

Organizers were determined to avoid the accusations of secrecy that plagued Bridge View Center for years. Organizer Tim Schwartz said the meeting was not technically open to the public, but no one was turned away at the door.

The group organizing the effort may need to be increased somewhat, Thompson said. Discussion during the meeting touched on how different demographic groups, including students, might be brought into the effort.

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